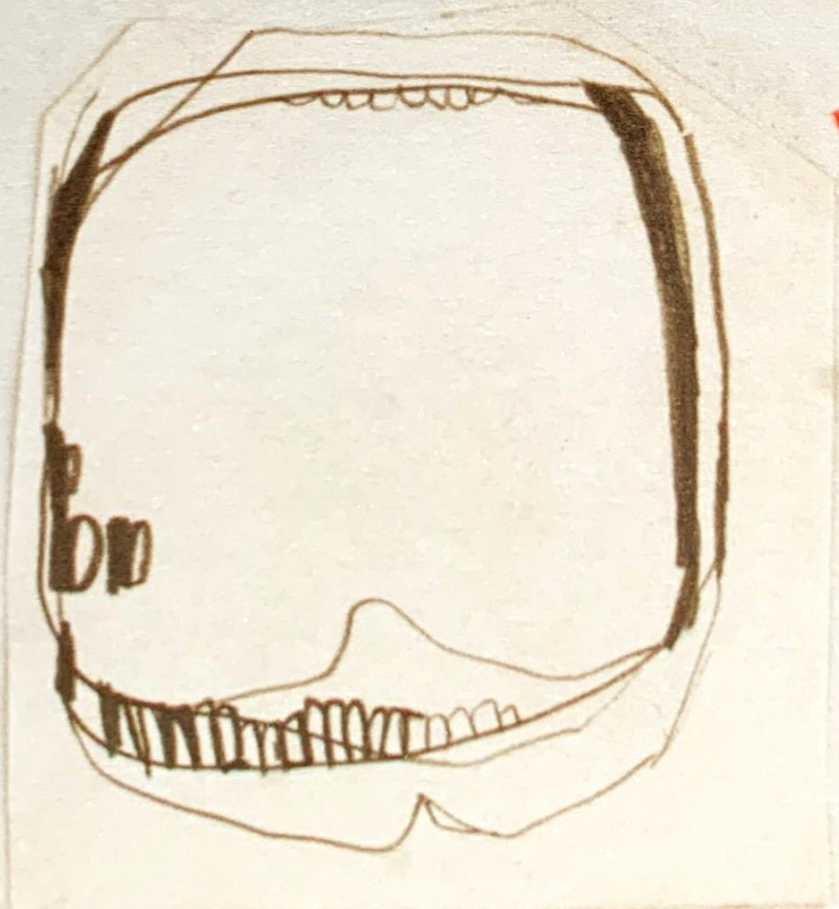
SALLY TAYLOR



Say What You See:
The Drawings of Sally Taylor

fig.1

From the walls of Sally Taylor's studio a crowd of mouths noiselessly clamour to be heard (fig.1). It is summer 2011 and I have joined the artist in Stonegrave, North Yorkshire to talk about her work in preparation for this catalogue essay. Since graduating from the Fine Art programme at Lancaster University in 1999, Taylor has established an exceptionally innovative art practice whose cultural worth has been acknowledged by a solo exhibition in 2010 at PS2, MIMA, Middlesbrough, representation at the 2011 Venice Biennale with the WW Gallery, London and, most recently, her third selection for the prestigious Jerwood Drawing Prize. At this relatively early stage in her career however, little has been written about her work. The exploratory beginnings of any artist's critical discourse are typically marked by the excitement of tentative intellectual exploration. In the case of a practice whose primary medium is drawing however, this sense of possibility is heightened by the newness of the discipline's discourse. As I and others have argued elsewhere, drawing's traditional, highly prized role as the backbone of artistic practice nevertheless rendered its status subservient to other modes of making. In the early 1990s, as *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing* written by Emma Dexter makes clear, a 'resurgence' of interest in general drawing paved the way for artists to adopt drawing as their 'principle medium.' In contrast to drawing's prior value as a tool of planning and straightforward representation, an emphasis on gesture, indexicality and performativity took precedence. This, coupled with the absence of a well-honed theoretical framework left the 'field,' as Dexter tells us, 'open for artists to make of it what they chose.' This short essay is consequently part of a privileged project. Like the visitors to *All Say The Same* at the Ryedale Folk Museum I too am presented with the question, how can these drawings be made sense of? As the title 'Say What You See' suggests, its argument proceeds from a process of attentive, embodied observation that forms the foundation of its analysis of the particular distinctiveness of these drawings and their relation to contemporary debates about drawing. Rather than reduce Taylor's practice to the illustration of predetermined ideas about art, this emergent discursive context mobilises

Small Mouth with Triangles,
Graphite and paper collage on book cover
22 x 18cm

the generative nature of drawing as a mode of thinking in accordance with Taylor's own avoidance of 'pre-meditation and ideology that could jeopardise the creative process.' Echoes of this stance are to be found in the 2007 anthology of collected works entitled *Drawing Now: Between the Lines of Contemporary Art.* Its collective authors argue for drawing's ability to work with concepts in a way that resists naming and definition via an 'ambiguous' use of representation. For them drawing is the outcome of the medium's access to 'networks of meaning, thinking and being.' In this vein, to borrow from social anthropologist Tim Ingold, the sense gleaned from such drawings may be comprehended as the result of movement and thought that, attentive to the course and handling of materials, is situated in an environment.

> *The drawings of Sally Taylor seem to be in a constant state of urgent communication. She is immersed in a daily studio practice that repeatedly affirms the primacy of the hand drawn mark.*
> Jonathan Parsons

From the walls of Sally Taylor's studio a crowd of mouths noiselessly clamour to be heard. To take Jonathan Parson's astute observation as a starting point is to beg the question, what is it that these works are trying to communicate? In the absence of sound and movement do these images offer the promise of dialogue while simultaneously signalling its difficulty, its violence, perhaps even its impossibility? Emerging via as many as two hundred drawings a day, the mouth motif is the outcome of what Norman Bryson has described as, a continuous state of 'becoming'; revisited and reworked over time, never resolved, never finding closure. The mouth motif presses upon the picture plane again and again at the behest of some unknown driving pressure, as Sally Taylor describes it a 'life force', inscribed by pencil as it scores the paper to appear as a fragmented, uncouth utterance. Each is loud or 'gobby', witty and yet executed in an aggressive, somewhat child-like, naïve fashion, jostling for attention, sometimes red, always raw, shouting, screaming and yet silent. Face to face with their unruly line and harsh colour the powerful images that Sally Taylor conjures in dialogue with her materials, I will argue, present the viewer with a play on muteness and articulacy.

The metaphor of imperative but impotent communication first emerged during our conversation in Taylor's studio in Stonegrave. In my mind it raised the spectre of the Modernist trope of the silent-scream, derived from one of the most iconic paintings of the late nineteenth century, Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893). Initially I refrained from mentioning such a cliché. Granted this work was new to me but surely, I thought, the artist would hope that I had something a bit 'more intelligent' to say than that. But as our conversation continued Sally Taylor acknowledged that this was precisely the kind of easily recognisable source on which she drew; thus situating her work within the realm of the 'popular' and the 'vernacular' often referenced in contemporary drawing. While historically *The Scream* has signified the Kafkaesque essence of the Modern existence, modern technologies of reproduction have rendered this image readily available for cheap, mass consumption and the butt of TV satire in shows such as *The Simpsons.* Not only can it be argued that *The Scream* now has kitsch value but it also brings with it the hackneyed signifiers of alienation, authenticity and expressionism that have been unspeakable for many critical and cultural theorists working in recent years. But that is precisely the point. In a culture of practice still largely enamoured of critical theory such an

inference makes the wrong connection, invokes the wrong kind of kitsch, and says the wrong thing but in the right way.

The 'values of selfhood and authenticity' that Sally Taylor places at the centre of her work align it with the wider strategies enacted by contemporary drawing that have resisted High Modernism's retreat within the medium, the monologic notion of mastery over materials and the subsequent swing to cerebral, 'clever' Conceptual Art and critical theory since the 1970s. This trend has been identified in *Drawing Now,* as a shift towards the 'subjective nature of drawing' that possesses a characteristic awkwardness and a stubborn resistance to 'conventional' subject matter and academic style – a leaning towards a conscious naivety, perhaps, and a denial of the signs of 'good drawing.' In this sense it could be said that via a bricolage of discipline specific action, aesthetic decision making and representation, Sally Taylor's works on paper mouth-off about the privileged status given to 'cognitive' encounters with art. Her practice enlists what Dexter has named drawing's capacity to act as a space of 'alterity' from which to articulate 'dissent, desire, fear and disorder.' Indeed the artist frequently invokes Louise Bourgeois' playful assertion that 'triangles mean trouble' to situate drawings such as *Mouth with Triangles 'aaa' 2* (fig.2) as a mode of resistance to those 'voices of authority' that prescribe what art can and cannot be.

Within twentieth century art practice there has been a no more authoritative voice than that of critic Clement Greenberg (1909-1994). In his classic 1939 essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' he famously excluded 'subject matter' from art and instead put forward an autonomous vision that would, he believed, keep 'genuine' culture 'moving.' This division of high and low culture had been highly divisive in terms of social class for the primary recipients of this exclusion were the 'new urban masses' whose insensibility to the values of 'genuine culture' cast them in the terms of what can be described, to borrow from Raymond Williams, as an undifferentiated 'many-headed multitude', malleable, 'low, ignorant and 'unstable.' As Greenberg wrote in 1939:

> *The peasants who settled in the cities as proletariat and petty bourgeois learned to read and write for the sake of efficiency, but they did not win leisure and comfort necessary for the enjoyment for the city's traditional culture. [...] the new urban masses set up a pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption.*

As Pierre Bourdieu's ferocious critique of Greenberg's aesthetics made clear in 1979, appeals for autonomy depended upon the 'systematic refusal of all that is "human."' This exclusion prohibited those 'passions, emotions and feelings [that] *ordinary* people put into their *ordinary* existence [...] what is generic, i.e. *common,* 'easy' and immediately accessible.' Since the 1970s artists and critical theorists alike have continued to rail against the aggressive retreat staged by Greenberg's Modernism. In the present context of site-specific and socially engaged art practice the difficulty for any studio based, gallery bound work is the assumption of its indifference to the question of audience in general and in particular those audiences beyond the gallery going public.

It is with this latter audience in mind that I recall the play of muteness and articulacy that coheres in Sally Taylor's handling of materials and subject matter. For the desire to communicate with an audience beyond the gallery going public is implicit within the creative means with which she weaves together pressing matters of alienation,

authenticity, raw sensibility, the human and classed subjectivity in these drawings. If it can be argued that Munch and the metaphor of the silent-scream offers a way in to this work, the second thread of my argument is the unanimous recognition of drawing's unique status as 'the primal means of symbolic communication' that both 'predates and embraces writing, and functions as a tool of conceptualisation parallel with language.' Drawing has continued to make its mark on humanity since the days that prehistoric lines were etched into the rocks at Ravenscar on the North Yorkshire Moors. Not everyone has made a sculpture but everyone, for good or ill, at some time or other has made a drawing. This historical lineage, moreover, has inured drawing to the ebb and flow of the Modern era's 'discourses' and 'isms.' As Dexter states, 'to draw is to be human.' It presents a special capacity for both communication and sociability 'an activity that connects us directly in an unbroken line with the first human who ever sketched [...].' Thus the vocabularies of '"Primitive" and "Outsider art"' with which the artist embraces 'gesture and impulse' in order to 'achieve images that are raw, painterly and representative of nervous energy' utilises a ready form of communication that holds the potential to reclaim art's estranged audience.

While there is not sufficient time to explore this question here, the 'human' nature of drawing, that features so prevalently in Tim Ingold's vision of a 'graphic anthropology' also offers the potential to break the impasse imposed by Modernism's removal of the studio from its environment and the disavowal of the network of social relations that flow through it. If Sally Taylor's drawings proceeded from a blank piece of paper, whose significance figures so prominently in contemporary debates about drawing, then it and the discrete, romantic vision of the studio might well limit the artist's emphasis on the 'connective', 'dialogical', performative nature of her drawing processes. But instead, Sally Taylor purposefully works on scraps of ordinary used paper and the inner sleeves of old book jackets that are sourced via a process of salvage and consequently bear the mark of social exchange. Rather than confined to a ground *fit* for the purposes of an autonomous art, the dialogic reach of her practice thus opens up to the doodles, notations and imperfections of others. The residual traces of ordinary lived lives form the foundations of what her drawings may become. Thus it can be argued that the dialogue that is enacted by Sally Taylor's is drawn in, of and from the social world and then returned to it once more. It is instructive here, as I approach the conclusion to invoke Ingold's essay 'Drawing Together: Doing, Observing, Describing':

> *There can be no life that is not social, or that evades this principle [...] togetherness binds all things, but they are not bound into a totality, or placed within a common frame. Like the lines of a drawing, the lines of social life manifest histories of becoming in a world that is never complete but always in progress.*

To situate Sally Taylor's drawing practice as a social project is to recognise the play on muteness and articulacy in her drawings as both a register of the vicissitudes of communication with others and an index of our irrepressible desire for a rapport with them; a desire that recalls both our beginnings beings and the warp and woof of our continued growth as social animals. More particularly her uncouth utterances register tentative reflection on the desire to be heard but fear of the classifying nature of speech. The anxiety that awareness brings in social situations has informed drawings such as

Mouth with Triangles "aaa" 3 (fig.3) with which Taylor has begun to 'investigate issues surrounding dialect and its associations.' 'aaa' at once articulates the frustration of the relentless onslaught of everyday life indicative of *The Scream* but also the flat 'a' characteristic of the 'culture of necessity of working class speech.' In this sense Sally Taylor has a great deal in common with the late great art critic and anarchist poet Sir Herbert Read (1893-1968). Native of Kirbymoorside, North Yorkshire and long-time resident of Stonegrave, Herbert Read's legacies as the twentieth century 'pope' of Modern have been sadly eclipsed by Greenberg and his detractors. His aptness for these closing remarks hails not from geography alone but from his politicised, pluralist vision of Modernism. For his vision of art was a social one, that insisted on the alterity of the individual and the primacy of feeling. Indeed how could he do otherwise? In the days of the best BBC received pronunciation, he not only stood firm with Henry Moore as a Yorkshireman who refused to relinquish his 'northern character' but also made that character the core of his biography of the great romantic hero William Wordsworth and called for the culturally specific enunciation of his poems using the Northern, clipped, flat 'a'. For Herbert Read, what good would an art be that could not acknowledge its inherently social nature; that did not have a potential to speak to the 'masses'? His community did not start and stop in the world of art and neither does Sally Taylor's. That is where I situate the drawn acts of this artist; the graphic outcomes of a process that, in a studio in Stonegrave, weave together and rethink the push and pull of the social world via a creative vocabulary and returns its findings to the visible.

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